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ABSTRACT

References to Lev Vygotsky have become fashionable in discussions of learning in the last few years. Drawing upon Vygotsky to explain small groups is speculative, as he never examined small groups. While the mechanics of small groups are important, they are only important if the overall culture of the classroom is supportive of students' effort to construct meaning independently. Research shows why small groups do not work for everyone. Four sophomore-level teachers from a large high school outside Chicago participated in a study. The teachers all taught short stories related to the theme of "coming of age." Small group discussions of the works lent support to Vygotsky's theories of the shaping power of culture on learning. The discussions reflected strongly the types of behavior fostered by the teachers in the whole class discussions. Teachers who provided a broad interpretive context for students did not appear to instill in students the ability to generate context for themselves. The teachers who were successful with small group discussions were those who prompted the students to generate conceptual context from their own experience. Accounting for the processes of small groups requires an understanding of the overall classroom culture. (Thirty-two references are attached.) (SG)

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Patterns of Discourse in Small Group Discussions of Literature

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Patterns of Discourse in Small Group Discussions of Literature

I'd like to begin my talk today by issuing several disclaimers which have the potential to call into question everything I subsequently say. My disclaimers are as follows:

1. First of all, the research I'll be discussing is not yet complete. What's missing at this point is the complete analysis of the data base from which I'm reporting my tentative conclusions. Pam Fly and I hope to have the data analysis finished by the end of the summer with the help of some statistical wizardry suggested by our friend and colleague John Behrens of the University of Oklahoma.

2. Second of all, even when the data analysis is complete I believe I will be able to draw only modest conclusions; indeed, as I see this study coming into focus I think it will yield some very exciting hypotheses, but will not have the power to close the book on any of the problems that I originally set out to investigate. The reason for my rare admission of modesty is that the sample I'm working with is very small. The study analyzed classroom discussions of literature from four different teachers, with each teacher providing one teacher-led discussion and two small group discussions of short stories. The two small group discussions provided by each teacher were randomly selected from a sample of five which were simultaneously conducted in each class; we chose to work with a sample rather than the whole set of five in order to make the data manageable. We've spent six

months so far working on the twelve transcripts that constitute the data base for the study and we're not yet finished, so I assure you that it's the nature of the work and not the industry of the investigators that accounts for the glacial pace of data analysis.

3. My third disclaimer is that I will focus today on results more than methodology. In order to make this presentation I've had to compress a seventy page document into a twenty minute time slot, several minutes of which I've already invested in my various disclaimers. If you're interested in the full blown account of the study, well, it's not ready yet. One point that is important is that we're analyzing the transcripts with the coding system developed by Jim Marshall for his U.S. Department of Education technical papers; it would take me half of my talk to explicate the coding system so you'll have to have a certain amount of faith in our interpretation of the transcript segments that I'll whisk by you later. Fortunately the research in all its glory will be published in at least one medium as part of an NCTE Research Report monograph co-authored by Jim Marshall and Michael Smith that looks at what we call "The Language of Discussion" in teacher-led, small group and adult book group discussions of literature. I'm indebted to both of these colleagues for their encouragement to go ahead with this project after I'd abandoned it at one point.

All that said, I think that this study will provide quite a

sufficient basis from which to generate some hypotheses about when and why small groups are successful vehicles for discussing literature. If I can look ahead somewhat to my conclusions, the study is suggesting that many of the things I've believed and promoted for many years about the success of small groups are wrong, or at least insufficient. In a number of my teacher-oriented publications and presentations I've hawked the idea that the success of small group discussions, whether used to improve writing or facilitate discussion of literature, depended on a number of mechanical considerations. And I've hardly been alone in that belief; most folks who've written about small groups focus on how to set them up. In the past I've stressed such factors as the importance of engaging students in a problematic task, the importance of the reward structure of groups, the importance of giving students explicit responsibilities, and so on. And it made sense for me to urge these considerations in that they made a great deal of difference when I used small groups successfully in my own high school classes, and when my friends used them in their classes to great acclaim. We were all quite certain that the mechanical aspects of small group formation and engagement were strong predictors of small group success, and the literature on the subject suggests that many other experts on the subject held a similar belief.

In the last few years I've become quite interested in other theories of learning that have caused me to look for other

factors that might influence the ways in which small groups work. Thanks to the influence of such friends as Steve Witte, Anne DiPardo and Melanie Sperling, I read a great many texts that forwarded a social view of learning, in particular the work of Vygotsky. Now references to Vygotsky have become de rigueur in discussions of learning in the last few years and I wish to assure you that I'm not simply jumping on the Vygotsky bandwagon. Indeed I think a few words are in order regarding my own particular interpretation of Vygotsky, in what must be known as the dawn of neo-Vygotskian age in American education. Vygotsky has most frequently been invoked in discussions of the role of small groups in various stages of the writing process. One frequent claim is that small groups work well because they place students in the company of capable peers and away from the domination of constraint-inducing teachers. Peer groups are often represented as Vygotskian learning environments in that the climate is conducive to the construction of meaning through the social influence of supportive peers, rather than having teachers dictate the agenda and direction of interpretations and response.

My own understanding of Vygotsky is quite different, and the ambiguity of how Vygotsky would view the current state of education in America is what causes me to label the current era the age of neo-Vygotskianism. Anybody who draws on Vygotsky to explain small group process is acting on speculation, because he never examined small groups. Rather, he focused on dyads,

particularly an adult leading a child to the highest reaches of potential. My employment of Vygotsky draws on a classroom culture that is dependent on the influence of a teacher in student learning, and my study of small groups examines them in the context of the presiding teacher's prior influence on classroom discourse.

Here I'll return to my original focus on the mechanics of small group functions and revise my original notions about how and why they work well: I now believe that while mechanics are important, they are only important <u>if the overall culture of the classroom is supportive of students' efforts to construct meaning independently</u>. The data from this study suggest that the behavior of teachers in discussions leading up to small group projects is critical in encouraging constructive patterns of discourse in the small groups themselves. I've known this intuitively for many years because small groups "just don't seem to work" for some teachers. I now have the data to support a hypothesis about <u>why</u> the groups don't work for everyone.

I'm going to give a brief overview of the study before sharing some of the transcripts that have led to this conclusion. Four teachers from a large public high school outside Chicago participated in the study. All four taught the sophomore curriculum, three teaching regular track sections and one teaching an honors section. The study was, of course, limited to teachers who volunteered their classes, which is why it included

the honors section. As part of the sophomore curriculum, the teachers all taught short stories related to the theme of "Coming of Age," a story genre that typically includes an exhibition of immature behavior by the protagonist at the outset, some great transforming experience, and then a demonstration of mature behavior at the end of the story.

Classroom discussions were taped in a particular sequence. On the first day, the teacher led a discussion of one short story. The teachers were urged to include references to the early immaturity, transforming experience and ultimate maturity of the protagonist at some point in their discussion, but otherwise were encouraged to lead a "typical" discussion. On the second day, the students formed small groups and discussed a second "Coming of Age" story; they were provided with discussion guides that asked them to identify the early immaturity, transforming experience and ultimate maturity of the protagonist. The purpose of this story heuristic was to keep the various discussions somewhat on the same page in order to reduce the variables under study.

The patterns of discourse in the discussions of literature lend support to Vygotsky's theories -- at least as I read them -- of the shaping power of culture on learning. At least in the very small sample of transcripts that we studied, the small group discussions reflected strongly the types of behavior fostered by the teachers in the whole class discussions. For the purposes of

brevity I'll not give a comprehensive review of the patterns but focus instead on some of the more intrigueing patterns.

One goal that all teachers appeared to have in their whole class discussions was to help students understand the story through the establishment of a conceptual framework and/or through the development of a personal context. Teachers provided these contexts in different ways, however, and the methods employed by the teachers in doing so appeared to have dramatic effects on the ways in which the students interacted in the small groups.

Two of the teachers provided the broader contexts themselves, sharing with their students lengthy personal experiences that illustrated the plight of the literary characters. Often these personal connections were quite riveting and relevant to the literary dilemma. Teachers who provided this context themselves, however, did not appear to teach their students how to generate relevant personal examples themselves; in their small groups discussions students of these teachers rarely produced such interpretive frameworks. Here, for instance, a teacher questions students about the behavior of a character, and then takes a student response and elaborates it into a lengthy context through which to frame an interpretation:

Teacher: Rachel, what happens after he jumps into the water?

Rachel: He saves the girl.

Teacher: Is it an easy saving?

Rachel: No, because the current pulls them under.

Teacher: That is described in great detail. Why do you suppose the author describes the saving in such great detail?

Student: [inaudible]

Teacher: It has to be arduous for anything to be important. It has to be difficult. For example, if it were easy to play the guitar, we would all be Eric Clapton. But all of us probably have sat down with either our guitar or somebody else's guitar. The first thing you find out is that it sort of hurts and it is hard to keep the frets down. So you get one chord and you struggle for a while, like row, row your boat. You got to change it, and it is difficult. Now, if it is a matter of just hopping off a two foot bridge into three feet of water and saying, don't be silly, you're all right honey, that is not going to be something that changes him very much. But in the act of saving itself, one particular thing happens between the two people. Can you remember what that is?

Teachers who provided a broad interpretive context for the students did not appear to instill in their students the ability to generate such contexts for themselves. Here, for instance, is a complete episode in the small group discussion of this

teacher's students:

Ellen: [Reads from assignment sheet] "What characteristics does the protagonist have at the beginning of the story that you would call immature? Give examples and explain why they are immature."

Betty: I don't know.

Judy: Wait, I forgot the story. Let me get my book right here.

Ellen: I think that at the beginning of the story, he thinks that to be mature, he's going to be six feet tall, he's going to have arms of steel and he thinks he's going to be in control.

Judy: He watches TV too much.

Ellen: And he thinks he's rebelling by eating grape seeds just because his mother is not there.

Ginny: Good answer.

Ellen: Somebody else talk. (pause) Does anyone else have any more reasons why he is immature?

Betty: Nope.

Such episodes were typical of the students whose teachers provided the broad context of interpretation: Their interpretations were brief and perfunctory, serving the pragmatic purpose of generating an acceptable answer and then moving on to the next question. In spite of the teacher's efforts to illustrate the importance of relating the literature to extra-

textual experiences, students did not appear to know how to do so.

The other two teachers in the study used questioning techniques in their whole class discussions that prompted the students to generate a conceptual, social and personal context from their own experiences in order to interpret the story; students of these teachers were far more capable of generating such a context in their small groups work. Here, for instance, the teacher builds on student responses to prompt students to elaborate a conceptual context through which to interpret the literary character's experience:

Patsy: He thought it was mature to, well, he was eating grapes and staying up late with, he was eating grapes and grape seeds and staying up late and watching TV without his mother's approval.

Teacher: OK, eating grapes and seeds and a couple of other examples. He was staying up late.

Patsy: Yeah.

Teacher: And he was also...

Patsy: Watching TV.

Teacher: And watching TV when told not to. And these fall into the category of what?

Patsy: Huh?

Teacher: These all have something in common.

Patsy: Well, disobeying.

Teacher: OK. He was disobeying his mother. All right. Now what can you do with this? In other words, what are you trying to tell us by bringing up these points?

Patsy: That he thought he was mature by disobeying his mother. He thought it made him a more mature person and older by doing things he wasn't supposed to do.

Teacher: Thought he was mature through these acts. OK, and what does Patsy think? Do you agree with it?

Patsy: What? No.

Teacher: Why not?

Patsy: He was just showing how immature he is by doing that.

Teacher: And what criterion of a definition of maturity are you using to make this judgment? Why is this, you are saying that this is, in fact, immature even though he thought he was mature. That is what you are saying, right?

Patsy: Yes.

Teacher: Why? You are saying he is immature because of something and that because is your definition. And what is it about your definition that allows you to make this judgment?

In their small group discussions students of this teacher worked to establish a similar sort of conceptual interpretive framework:

Veronica: The protagonist was very insecure.

Kay: Why is he insecure?

Hope: Why is he insecure? Because he stayed home all the time and didn't want to go on this trip.

Kay: So that was immature?

Tammy: That was insecure.

Hope: Insecure which is immature.

Tammy: Yeah.

Kay: Why is immaturity insecurity?

Tammy: [reads from assignment sheet] "... that you would call immature?"

Kay: Why is insecure immature? By staying home, is that immature?

Tammy: No, he had no friends.

Kay: No friends is insecure?

Hope: No, he's insecure and insecurity is immaturity.

Kay: The second question asks, "Explain why..."

Tammy: You have to know yourself and he doesn't therefore he's insecure.

Hope: Insecure means no self-knowledge.

Tammy: Yeah.

Kay: OK, he had no self-knowledge. Now, why is that immature?

Tammy: Because he was too protected.

Hope: It's immature because...

Kay: He was protected.

Hope: Yeah. He was 17, he was afraid to go out. Well, actually...

Kay: He was old enough to know...

Hope: Right.

Kay: He spent his life at home.

Hope: He was never really out.

Veronica: Maybe he was a hermit. I don't know why. He just like stayed at home with his family. I feel sorry for him.

Hope: He's one of those people you don't want to know. How is no self-knowledge immature?

Tammy: Let me explain this one. You see like, no self-knowledge, that leads to... I don't know.

Kay: He has no idea what the outside world is.

Tammy: You have to know yourself and by knowing yourself you know your limits.

Hope: Yeah.

Simply modeling an interpretive strategy, then, does not appear to be effective in teaching students how to apply it; teachers must saturate the classroom culture with an emphasis on students generating their own interpretive framework for analyzing literature. The teacher in the excerpt just given never explicitly told students that he was teaching them a strategy, yet they seem to have internalized it through routine

participation in such exchanges.

The teachers whose students engaged in elaborated small group discussions employed techniques to prompt their students to develop insufficient responses in the whole class discussions. One teacher, for instance, had a method of repeating student statements in the form of a question in order to prompt them to elaborate:

Jane: ...it seems like she is just this mother figure. He is kind of scared of her.

Teacher: He is kind of scared of his grandmother?

Jane: Yeah. Like she is kind of turning against him.

Teacher: She is turning against him?

A method such as this appeared quite effective in getting students to internalize their own self-prompts for elaborating; students of teachers who demonstrated some method of prompting elaboration provided longer, more detailed analysis of the literature in their small groups than teachers who provided the elaboration themselves.

Another means through which teachers created a climate for detailed small groups analysis was through their use of questioning. Dillon (1988) and others have observed that teachers spend much of their class time posing questions. Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) have concluded that questions that involve uptake -- that is, those that build on student interpretations -- lead to "authentic" discussions of literature.

Uptake questions also appear to serve as elaboration prompts. Teachers whose questions served to point students to particular areas of the text and to particular interpretations did not appear to empower students to guide their own discussions insightfully. "Uptake" sequences such as the following were correlated to longer episodes in the small group discussions:

> Larry: You don't have a male figure if you are a man, and you don't have a reference because you see things a little differently because men and women have different ....
>
> Teacher: Yeah, he has just got a grandmother and an aunt in the house, and he has just lost his mother. It doesn't seem like he ever had a father around. So you are saying you wouldn't call it immaturity? You would call it...
>
> Fred: Innocence.
>
> Larry: No. I think it is more what is going on in the house.
>
> Teacher: Just a reflection of the life, the way he has been growing up?

In this sequence the teacher is using his questions to build on student interpretations and get them to elaborate on or defend their ideas. Such a questioning method appeared highly effective in getting students to engage in extensive discussion in their small group sessions.

A final effective discussion-leading strategy was for the teacher to make the process of analysis explicit by calling attention to procedural issues in the interpretation of literature, as in the following sequence:

> Teacher: I think we assume they must [have four children] because she is supporting them, right?
>
> Chorus: Yeah.
>
> Teacher: There is something else that we need to ask.
>
> Sally: What happened to the uncle?
>
> Teacher: We don't get any information about the boy's father or the grandfather, for that matter. Any of the men, we don't learn anything about in the story. But there is another question from the beginning, at least about his behavior.

Students of teachers who made the process of interpretation explicit by pointing out the need to pose questions, to make generalizations, to search for evidence, to refer to a broader conceptual framework and so on had longer, more detailed small group discussions than did students of teachers who simply modeled the interpretive behavior.

From this study we perceive a relationship between the patterns of discourse in teacher-led discussions and the small group discussions that follow them. If the teacher-led discussions analyzed are typical of the long term patterns of discourse enculturated in the students over the course of the

year, then we can say that the small group discussions are not so much derivative of the particular teacher-led discussions captured in the research but an extension of the continuum of discussions enacted during the school year.

We might say that the sort of scaffold erected by the teachers whose students interacted poorly in their small groups is the rigid type criticized by DiPardo and Freedman as being one-directional. The interactive discussions of the teachers whose small groups engaged fruitfully represented the dynamic communication envisioned by Vygotsky. This study suggests that each class has its own culture that provides a particular learning environment that affects the ways in which students grow. Certain environments appear to help nurture students through the zone of proximal development more effectively than others. This study also suggests that we cannot investigate particular classroom episodes without examining how they represent the broader sequence of events that lead up to and issue thus from them. The processes of small groups are a function of the overall classroom culture; accounting for them requires an understanding of the patterns that govern the life around them.

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